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Using VISP (VIdeos for SPeaking), a mobile app based on audio description, to promote English language learning among Spanish students: a case study.

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Abstract

Audio description has proven to be beneficial in foreign language learning (Moreno & Vermeulen, 2013, 2014). Taking a step further, we developed a mobile assisted language learning application called *VISP* (*VIdeos for SPeaking*), which uses the techniques of audio description to promote accuracy and fluency in oral production. In this work we present the results from a case study carried out with 16 Spanish Erasmus students of English as a foreign language, during the first semester of 2014-2015 at the Department of Translation, Interpreting and Communication of the Faculty of Arts of Ghent University, who tested the pilot version. Based on these results we present some proposals for improvement and future research.

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Keywords: foreign language learning; audio description; app; mobile assisted language learning

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1. Introduction

Nomenclature

AD	audio description
ADS	audio description script
CEFRL	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
FL	foreign language
FLL	foreign language learning
MALL	mobile assisted language learning

From the 70's of the 20th century, theatre plays and films began to be audio described to enhance the accessibility of blind or visually impaired people (Snyder, 2005). The task of an audio describer consists in adding visual information orally in the gaps between discourses. Due to time limitations and according to 'good practice' instructions, audio describers have to be capable of formulating what they see in a concise and accurate way, using specific and precise language (Basich Peralta *et. al,* 2009). Recently, audio description (AD) has been successfully applied in the foreign language (FL) classroom by Clouet (2005), Martínez Martínez (2009) and Ibáñez Moreno & Vermeulen (2013, 2014) to improve the written, lexical and phraseological competence of language students. To meet the needs of the *On demand* generation that wants "anything, anyplace, and anytime" (Caudron, 2011: 25.), as well as to promote learner's autonomy, in line with the principles of ubiquitous learning (as in Jones and H. Jo, 2004) we implemented AD to mobile learning, following the principles suggested by Stockwell, G., & Hubbard, P. (2013), Pareja-Lora et al. (2013), and Kukulska-Hulme (2013).

The aims of this case study was to carry out empirical research about the effectiveness of using AD in a MALL app to promote (1) oral production, (2) vocabulary learning and the students' awareness of the importance of using accurate vocabulary, and (3) intercultural competence, through the awareness that what they communicate is strongly influenced by their particular way of looking at things and also the awareness of the importance of taking into account the recipient in communication. In order to do that we implemented an app that we designed, named *VISP* (*VIdeos for SPeaking*), which contains a short movie clip that has to be audio described. VISP v1 was tested on 16 volunteer Spanish students of English as an FL (in fact 21 students completed the post-questionnaire, but only 16 performed the task). In this article some of the results are described.

2. Methodological preliminaries

From a pedagogical point of view, the communicative approach was followed when devising VISP, and within it, the task-based approach, in line with Ellis (2003), who conceives a task as a communicative activity whose goal is to achieve a specific learning objective. In the present case, students assume the role of audio describers, performing a real task as presented in everyday life and thus emulating the use of language in authentic situations. Besides, the CEFRL (2001) highlights the role of intercultural competence, which also plays an important role in AD, as argued by Vercauteren & Orero (2013).

Given the complex task of audio describing, VISP has been designed for intermediate English language learners who want to practice their oral skills while enhancing the use of accurate vocabulary and phrasal awareness. As is well known, the correct use of standardized phrases and formulaic language is an important yardstick for high-level L2 proficiency (Wray, 2002; Boers *et al.,* 2006; Durrant & Schmitt, 2010; Schmitt, 2013).

3. Procedures

The process of audio describing a video using VISP involves several steps: the participants have to: 1) read a small introduction to AD, watch an example and complete a pre-test questionnaire, 2) view a clip, 3) draft a small AD script (if necessary) for the clip, 4) record the AD script over the clip (that is, produce an audio described clip) and 5) complete a final questionnaire.

The participants in this first testing of VISP were 16 Spanish Erasmus students from at the department of Translation, Interpreting and Communication of the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature of the Ghent University (Belgium). They were supposed to have an English level of B1 according to the CEFRL (2001), since that is the level required to enter the Erasmus group. According to the pre-questionnaire, 68% said they had heard of AD before, and the others could guess what it was. Only two of them had had previous experience with AD. In the pre-questionnaire the students were also asked to translate some words or phrases from Spanish into English and from English into Spanish. This part of the questionnaire was designed to prepare them for their task, because all of the words they had to translate also appear in the AD of the clip on de DVD: *forehead*, *a type writer*, *to stare at, to put to*, *a beard*, *tearfully*, *the cityscape*, *to turn back,* etc.

After completing the pre-test questionnaire, the students watched a short clip (30 seconds) from the film *Moulin Rouge* (Luhrmann, 2001), as many times they wanted. Once they felt ready they could start writing the AD script (ADS) of what they saw, following some basic guidelines. According to the instructions in step 2, the users where told to perform the role of audio describers by formulating what they saw on the 30 seconds clip of *Moulin Rouge,* in a concise and accurate way, using specific and precise language, so that a blind or visually impaired person could easily follow the plot in the absence of speech. All of them drafted a written ADS before recording and sending it. Once they clicked the *send* button on the application an mp3 recording arrived to a *gmail* account. After that the students had to fill in a post-questionnaire, to assess their own performance, which included the clip with the official and AD (from the DVD). The transcription of this AD (55 words) is provided below:

(1)

The handsome young man, Christian, in his twenties, with dark hair and beard, takes a new line on his typewriter. He puts his hand to his forehead. Through his open window lies Paris at night. Tearfully, he stares out of the window, at the Moulin Rouge. He turns back to the typewriter. The Paris cityscape.

The post-questionnaire was designed to auto-evaluate the task, as already mentioned. Participants assessed how they described the time (e.g. *at night*), the setting (e.g. *a room*, *the Moulin Rouge*), the character (e.g. *a young man*), his mood (e.g. *tearfully*) by reflecting about the way they had formulated what they saw, with questions such as *How did you describe the actions? Which adjectives or adverbs did you use? Did you describe the setting by using X?* The last questions in the post-questionnaire concerned their self-perception and awareness on their learning improvement after using VISP.

4. Results and discussion

The results described here are based on the analysis of the transcriptions of the participants' recordings, which are compared to both the pre- and the post-questionnaires. Starting by the transcriptions, the table below shows the actual use of key vocabulary by the participants. The second column includes those words that were exactly as in the original ADS; column three includes those expressions that are also correct but that do not express exactly the same as in the original ADS; column four includes those terms incorrectly used, and the last column indicates the amount of transcriptions where these expressions were not audio described. Finally, the table also includes those expressions that were frequently used by students but were not present in the original ADS. This means that an ADS is not the only way to describe what appears on the screen:

Table 1: Transcriptions of students' ADs: results.

Words in the original ADS	Words in the ADSs by students			
	Exact word(s)	Accurate but not the same as in the ADS	Inaccurate word(s)	Not audio-described
Forehead	2	Face (3) Head (1)	Front (1)	9
Typewriter	12	0	Writing machine (1)	3
To stare	0	Look through (8)	Look to (5) Look out (1) Look at (1)	1
Put	3	Touch (3)		10
Beard	1	0		15
Tearfully	0	He cries (2) Tears (2)		12
Cityscape	1	0		15
The Moulin Rouge	8	The Moulin Rouge windmill (1)		7
At night	4	0		12
Words/Expressions not present in the original ADS and present in the students' ADs				
Cancan dancers	12			
Windmill	6			
Letters	5			

The results above show the answer to one of our research questions: the use of accurate vocabulary. They are very diverse: although most of the students (11 out of 16) described the character accurately (*a young man*), only one of the expressions they had to translate in the pre-test (*typewriter*) was really retained (12 students used it in their AD). In the other cases, the students used synonyms or did not describe the event. In the case of *forehead*, only two students used it. Three others used *face* and one used *head* to indicate that the protagonist touches his forehead (*He touches his face/head*). Most students (nine out of 16) did not describe this event at all. As for *stare*, none of the students used that precise verb in their AD, even though nine of them used the word as a translation for *mirar con atención* in the pre-questionnaire. Also, table 2 shows some expressions that most or some of the students described and that were not present in the original ADS, such as *cancan dancers*. This shows that audio describing is not a closed, fixed task and that even the original scripts can be improved. In the case of the cancan dancers, if most of the students considered them important, it may well be important for the blind audience.

As we can see, then, certain referents were more easily identified and described than others (*a young man*, *cancan dancers*, and *typewriter*), while others were just not considered important by students (*forehead*, *beard*, *tearfully*), as seen by the fact that they were in their majority not described. Other concepts relating to actions, such as *stare*, were actually described, but not in the same way as in the ADS: *to stare out of the window* was expressed as *to look through the window*.

As for the post-questionnaire results, there is some discrepancy between the students' perception on what they described and their actual performance, especially regarding the description of actions. Regarding referring expressions, for example, when asked *Did you describe the character?* 15 of them said that they had used the expression *a young man* as seen in figure 1 below:

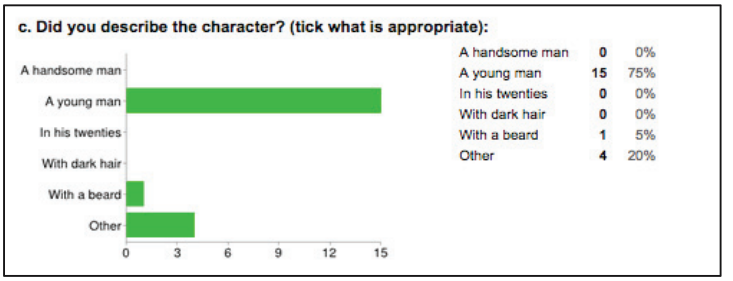

Fig. 1. Results in the post-questionnaire: answers to question c.

However, 11 students actually used the expression *A young man*, instead of 15. When it comes to self-evaluating their description of actions the students also feel positive about how they described what the character does, as the following figure shows:

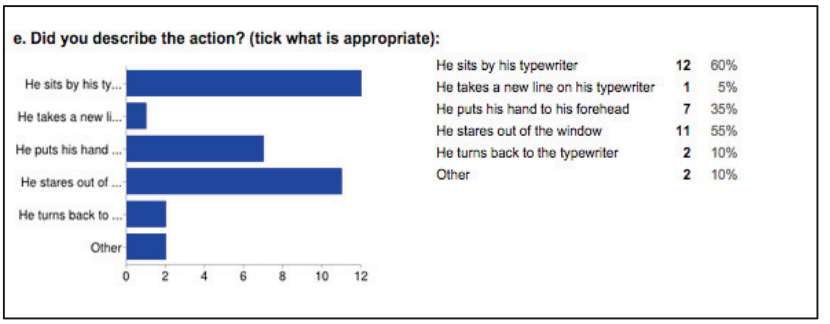

Fig. 2. Results in the post-questionnaire: answers to question e.

However, there is a discrepancy between the student's perception on what they say they described and the way they described it, as seen in illustration (2), where an account of how students actually formulated the expression *He sits by his typewriter* is provided:

(2)

AD on the DVD: He sits by his typewriter: 0

a. He sits in front of a typewriter: 2

b. He is sitting in a dark room: 1

c. He sits in a dark room: 1

d. Sitting in front of the typewriter: 2

e. He sits *in a typewriter: 1

Finally, as for the last part of the post-questionnaire, students had to reflect about their performance on the AD-based task and on how it had contributed to their language learning, so the results contribute to answering research questions (2) and (3). For example, the figure below shows the answers to one of the questions:

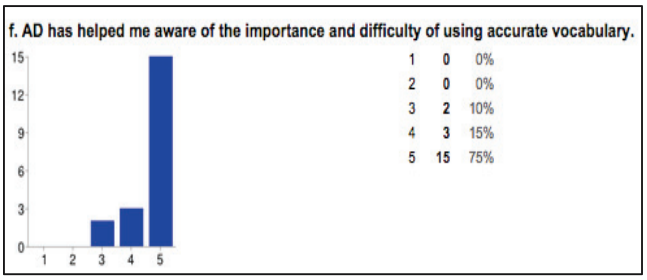

Fig. 3. Results in the post-questionnaire: answers to question f.

Globally, all students declared that AD had made them aware of the importance of accurate vocabulary (100%), of taking the audience into account (100%), and that it had made them reflect about their language learning (100%), and all of them except of one declared that AD had made them aware of how what we communicate has to do with how we perceive things (90%).

5. Conclusions and suggestions for future research

In this work we have focused on the use of accurate vocabulary and concise, precise formulation when performing tasks by students of English as an FL using a MALL app. All 16 volunteers said to have enjoyed the activities and to have learned something new about this modality of audiovisual translation. However, the results show that there still is a long way to go if we want to obtain results that are in accord with our learning objectives. Even if students showed motivation and a positive attitude towards the app, their actual learning of vocabulary still needs improvement. In the future we will focus more on standardized phraseology instead of on the use of single words.

As for the perception on their own learning process via this app, the students overestimated their performance. This is good regarding attitudinal contents, but we must do something to improve our own assessment and measurement tools in order to shorten this distance and make VISP lead to an app with which users can actually learn a major number of new words and expressions. Also, in the future we are planning to include a large battery of clips that will be divided according to their learning content per level, and per lexical and/or grammatical categories. As for research question (1), *Does VISP actually promote oral production?* some students left positive comments on the app, by stating that they had enjoyed practicing their oral skills with it. However, a specific study focusing on this specific issue is needed to make this statement.

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